

## Sword and Spinner: The Far Shore

**[FX: A small stringed instrument picks its way through notes.]**

**Chloe, as the intro:** Sword and Spinner, Episode Four: The Far Shore

**[FX: The sound of the ocean fades in, interspersed, occasionally, by the faint sound of crows.]**

Illiknans were good at sussing out when a storm would hit. Days in advance, even. It was an ache that started in their bones, moved to their joints, and migrated into their heads to sit somewhere between a tension headache and a hangover. It was one way to tell who had been born in Remus's country and who had not: no expat had the ability. And the longer you were away from the sea, the duller the ache became.

(It wasn't a *bad* ache, though. It was a comfort, to know. A comfort, for the water to love you enough to remind you. Rhyseans had their trees and their rebirth and their longing for dead magic. Remus had logic, and he had the sea, and the sea held him.)

(Less, now. The ache was so dull he hardly felt it, most days.)

But this girl did. And this girl hadn't yet learned to lean into it.

"There's a storm coming," she repeated, the only thing she'd said since they'd awoken that morning. Remus's head had the dulllest pounding, a reminder that what the girl said was true. Lila's head, by the way she complained, had far more than a dull pounding, but that was less about divination and more about overindulgence. Sleeping in a barn likely hadn't helped, but Remus had wanted the both of them to be fresh — in mind if not body.

Lila stank like mead; he probably stank like the horse shit he'd shoveled for their privilege of sleeping in the farmer's hay.

*Fucking Rhyseans* — custom made it clear that they weren't guests of the farmer's house unless they stayed in his *house*, not barn, and the man had been very squirrely about acting in such a way to give them no way to invoke guest rites. In Remus's home country, no one but landlords made a traveler work to sleep in the stables. In Remus's home country, their mothers would have brought any travelers a meal and a blanket without them pleading to be considered human.

Of course, Remus knew his accent and his gruffness and his sword did them no favors.

*Of course*, Lila had hissed the night before, both of them trying not to be pricked by straw, *if you'd just told them who we were, the farmer would've fallen onto his knees and brought us into his house as heroes.*

*I live off my work, not my reputation*, Remus had snapped, *and I refuse to pay this man to play at hospitality. You know this. If you disagree, find someone else to travel with.*

Of course, Lila was half-frustrated about leaving the party early and half-upset he'd taken the word of a child for a case in the first place. But she would warm up, soon enough. Remus didn't know what she had against prolonged exposure to children except that perhaps they reminded her of how emotionally stunted she was.

The girl had taken to them both, curling up in the straw between them and stretching one hand out to Lila, who'd begrudgingly taken it only after Remus shot her a glare that lasted more than forty-five seconds. She'd only offered up the name *Oigo* when asked, a nickname meaning something closer to *little one* or *little sibling* than a proper

name. By the light of day — the diluted light of day, slanting further and further towards the gray-blue diffusion of light that came from stormclouds and warning the further day went along — Oigo was twitchier. Maybe that was the storm. She was at once anxious and terrified to return home.

Remus knew the feeling well.

“There’s a storm coming,” Oigo repeated, worry lacing her voice.

“Yeah, kid, we know,” Lila muttered in Rhysean, massaging her temple with one hand. “Stars, how did I manage to drink so much in an hour?”

“Beyond me,” Remus muttered back, still in Iliknan. It was hard to shake, now that there was someone around that didn’t have to strain to understand him. He missed it. It hurt that he missed it.

“Damn. Maybe leaving early would’ve been better.”

Remus didn’t even have to open his mouth to say *I told you so* for Lila to divine that as what he meant.

“*Don’t say ‘I-told-you-so’. I will punch you in the mouth.*”

Oigo stopped in her tracks. Remus nearly tripped in the effort it took to not run her over. “This is it.”

Remus peered through the last of the trees, scraggly things that gave way, gave way, gave way to a shoreline rough with rocks and jagged with age. Too close to the water there was a beacon — a lighthouse — made of stone that, at the bottom edge facing the sea, eroded away in a way that must have been from the incoming tide. The entire thing listed. At the top of the tower, the fire had gone out.

“Home,” said Oigo, but she didn’t sound excited about it. “Don’t be afraid, please. There’s a storm coming.”

Lila let out a long and high laugh not entirely unlike a goat’s bleat. In Rhysean, she said, “Remus? Are you also getting absolutely terrible vibes from a six year old telling two battle-scarred warriors not to be afraid of a lighthouse? Are we sure we want to do this?”

“One,” Remus corrected. He picked up Oigo’s hand again and, gently, began to pull her towards the entrance. “One battle-scarred warrior and one nervous bard. Come on. We have a job.”

This close to the beach, water thick with foam-capped waves, Remus did not need the pounding in his head to know a storm had come. The ocean was green; the clouds were so dark a gray they made everything lighter than them shine and quake. Inside, the lighthouse snaked upwards and upwards and upwards, rounded stone steps that leeched a cold so strong it found its way through the bottom of Remus’s shoes. They followed the spiral, Lila running one hand along a slight waist-high indent that curved along with the wall. Wind whistled thick through the carved windows in the stairwell.

At the top, the lighthouse room was sooty and cold and wet. Two beds pressed against one wall, sheets unmade and blankets coming apart at the seams. One of the three glass panes before the brazier — just as damp as the rest of the room, no fire in sight — had been shattered — or, no, that wasn’t right. It hadn’t been *completely* shattered, glass shards and nothing else. There was a large jagged hole. It looked more like something had been thrown *through* it.

And at the kitchen table, in a tableau of domesticity, sat a young boy, a mother, and a corpse. The mother fed the corpse. The corpse, of course, did not eat.

“Do not be afraid,” Oigo whispered, and with a patter of delicate motion — daughter on surveillance mode — she took her seat at the table.

The woman Remus could only assume to be the mother of the two children before them snapped her head up and gasped. “*Visitors*,” she sang, and turned back towards the corpse, planting her hands on her hips. “*Inamorato*? Do you see this?”

That was – the Illiknan word for *lover*. *Lover*, like *husband*.

“Oh, *fuck* no,” Lila breathed.

The corpse stared straight ahead. It did not see.

Remus, not taking their eyes off the corpse-of-a-father, bowed, very stiffly. He swept his foot back as he did so to kick Lila into doing the same. “We are honored to be guests of your house,” he said in Illiknan, making a conscious effort to not let one hand stray to his sword hilt. “We hear that there is a ghost.”

All four of them — save Lila and the corpse-of-a-father — flinched as thunder boomed outside — more of a reaction to the promise of *storm*, sharp now in all their heads, rather than at the noise. Once recovered, the mother said — “Oh! You must be mistaken. We are all well here. No ghosts to be seen.”

She went back to feeding the-thing-that-was-once-her-husband. Her husband did not eat.

The storm drew nearer outside. Lightning flickered through the windows, and under his breath, the older brother began to count — *one, two, three* — thunder boomed. His small face went pale.

“Miss,” Lila tried, in the best Illiknan she could conjure. “He’s – dead.”

Thunder, again. The mother stiffened, something sallow as quick over her face as the lightning outside, then — “Nonsense. You hear the storm. He’ll wake soon.”

Oigo hummed a nervous little tune and turned over her shoulder to offer Remus large, pleading eyes. Suddenly, they remembered what she’d said — *my mother is crazy my mother is crazy, my father wakes from the dead when storms come.*

*Oh. Oh, fuck.*

Rain started to fall outside. And then, in exactly the way one would expect a body repossessed to come back alive, the father’s head snapped up and his eyes opened wide.

“See?” delighted the mother. “Children, your father comes home!”

The father climbed onto his chair, gawky and awkward, a puppet on strings, a ghost in a rotting brain having to tell every single body part where to go. The neck rolled, flopping back and letting out a *crack* as control was lost over the upper half. It righted itself, but not at the correct angle. The chest performed exactly one deep breath — in, sharp, with a good ten seconds until the unsteady gasping release — the mother laughed and clapped her hands, throwing her arms wide — the-thing-that-used-to-be-father straightened, and straightened, and straightened, bones popping, and threw itself at the mother.

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Chaos. Lila yelled a second variation on *fuck*, stumbling backwards and away from the fight. The two children jumped into action, both running from the table to the far side of the room where the brother pulled a length of rope from beneath their bed. Remus drew his sword, frozen, watching the carnage, as Lila yelled *Remus what are you doing kill it* and the mother still laughed and laughed as the thing bore down on her chest and scrabbled its hands closed around her throat.

The brother snapped, "*Oigo*," and tossed his sister one end of the rope — she caught it, and ducked closer to her snapping parents, passing the length of rope between the thing's outstretched hands and chest. Both children ran behind the father and turned and pulled, the rope catching him round the stomach and wrenching him, body still locked in that animal position, from their mother.

It hit the floor, hard, and limbs began twitching. Oigo turned to him, face red and tear-streaked, and pleaded, "*Reaper-king!*"

He found his nerve. Remus plunged their sword through the thing's chest.

The thing-that-used-to-be-a-father did not die. It was, despite its movement, of course, already dead. Its stomach shuddered, then, around the blade, forced its chest up again into another breath — air wheezed out from around Remus's sword and black-bile blood spluttered and bubbled up with it. It forced its chest back down — then snapped its arm out and closed it round Remus's ankle.

The mother shrieked — *don't kill him!* And Lila, behind Remus, let out a retching sort of laugh. "He's been dead."

"Do you still not believe in ghosts?" Remus ground out, yanking their sword out and stepping on the father's wrist to be able to kick his foot free.

Lila made another choking laugh sound. "Ghost don't exist in Rhysea—"

"--Tell that to this one," Remus snapped, and turned to Oigo and her brother as the thing tried to figure out how to pull itself back to its feet. "What do you do with it? Before?"

"The boat," the brother breathed. "You have to tie it to the boat so it can't get inside."

*Ghosts and gods and stars.* Why hadn't they buried the body to let out the soul? It made an awful kind of sense that it woke up in storms with the rest of them, storms made everything Illiknan more *alive* — but — *How was there a ghost in Rhysea? How?*

They were close to the shore. This was an Illiknan house. These people were —  
Fuck. *Fuck.*

"Lila – deal with her," he snapped, where the mother, too, was pulling herself back to her feet, neck red and already bruising but that same same smile curling her face. "You two — help me get it to the boat. I know—" they swallowed, hard. "I know what we have to do."

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A boat and oars and far too far and not far enough across a storm-green sea. Bad ideas and bad ideas but Remus would not drown, would they? *Would they?* Lightning close overhead. He knew the ocean well, even all these years later — besides, they were the only one that could row all the way across to the shore-across-the-sea. They'd done the row across this straight in much worse shape. It hadn't been far from this beach. They'd been bloodier and angrier and it'd been hard to see through their tears — *fuck*, why had they cried, back then? Because of *home*? Leaving *home*? Stupid, stupid.

Remus had thought he'd never go back across the sea. But now — there was a body and a ghost struggling to get back in control — and there was the brother, who'd helped Remus tie his father down as it snapped and struggled and flailed.

It was clearly not the first time. If Remus's plan worked, it would be the last.

Lila had had to fight the mother back inside, locking her in the lighthouse as the water crept up and up towards the base of the tower. She'd had to pull Oigo away, up the cliffside, as she'd yelled and fought too as her brother climbed with Remus into the boat



and they'd rowed away. They were safe against the bluff — Remus, his back to Illikna, could still see the outline of them halfway across the channel — Lila's hand pulled over Oigo's shoulder. He was sure she was clutching Lila tight.

A gust of wind whipped the boat sideways. The boy yelped as a wave crashed over the narrow stern, soaking them both.

"Hold on," Remus managed. The boat shook — thunder rumbled, and both of them, still too Illiknan despite being gone — flinched into it.

The ghost reawoke and strained against the ropes, something phlegmy and rotting growling up from his throat.

"Blade," Remus grunted. The boy took his sword, struggling — it was taller than he was — and stuck it back through his father's chest. He did not flinch, even when the Thing-That-Used-To-Be-His-Father spasmed and kicked and went still.

They made it. They made it across, despite the waves despite the rain, Remus crashing into the surf and soaking their boots. He stumbled onto the shore — fighting the pull of the waves and the sand — the sand, the sand, the sand — and beached the boat. This time, as he yanked the corpse from the boat and into the shallow sand and surf and swung the boy out of the boat by his armpits, dangling like a cat, the body collapsed. It did not try to rise again, sand rushing around it and over, catching in its eyelashes and crows' feet and cracked lips.

It was *home*. Somehow, the soul knew this. Somehow, it knew that it could be a ghost here.

Remus turned to the boy. "Get the shovels," they commanded. "He needs a proper burial, your father."

Gods and ghosts and stars, it was practically the same fucking beach as the Rhysean one he'd just left. Why did it feel so *different*? Why was it warmer, why did it smell better – same salt and storm and sweet-bitter tree scent of leaf rot and pine, but a comfort, now, instead of a reminder of loss?

No. *No*. This still did feel so sharply like a reminder of loss. It just — everything was easier at home. The space was kinder to move through.

They began to dig. Remus finally asked, most of the way to the bottom of the grave – “Kid. Hey, kid. What's your name?”

“Acastus,” replied the boy, wiping dirt off his forehead, after only a moment's hesitation.

“And was it –” Remus swallowed, hard. “Was it a family name?”

“Yes,” said Acastus. He gave Remus a long, sharp look that was much too old for his age. It told Remus that he knew what Remus had done to a different boy named Acastus in the name of a king Remus no longer believed in. And yet, and yet, when they'd needed help — the siblings sought Remus out instead of any other hunter or *gladicus* or ranger. Remus. *Remus*. What sort of grace had he earned to deserve this? To make something right among a family he'd helped to break? How terribly ironic, that despite their vehement beliefs, despite the ways that other Acastus had hated Remus and he'd hated Acastus, they'd ended up in the same place — exiled.

Yes, they'd both been destroyed by Remus's friend in the end. Even if they'd fought on opposite sides of the war.

The storm broke and it was like Remus was able to breathe again. All three sagged — the body, the boy, and the old reaper-king — as their headaches disappeared and turned

back to nothing. Acastus's father was dead, again, and this time Remus hoped that there would be enough weight on his chest for the soul to escape.

Acastus looked over to Remus. "We need to go home," he said, small and serious. "My sister is waiting. My mother is — she is waiting, too."

Remus peered back across the sea. The lighthouse marked the end of the shallow channel water on the far shore (but not – well, from here, it *was* the far shore). Somewhere at the cliff's edge, Lila and Oigo would be waiting.

And suddenly, Remus felt like they were going to throw up. They were back home. *They were back home.* But if they went any farther than this — if they tried to go back to the town they grew up to find mothers or siblings or *friends*, they'd be sold out and brought before a king-that-used-to-be-a-friend. And that king would look at Remus, maybe even put their face in his hands, and tenderly drag a knife across his throat.

If he went home — how many weeks could he last before that end? Two? Three? Maybe no one would remember him at all. Maybe time had changed him enough that he could live quietly back in Illikna.

Or maybe not — maybe he would get home, and everyone would run hands along the hilt of his sword in the hope of luck, call him *reaper-king* in hushed and reverent tones and thank him for service done. But if the people *did* remember him, oh, the betrayal would come, because the king that now sat on the throne of Illikna wasn't nearly as selfless as Remus had always thought. Maybe the people would remember the way Remus had walked through the countryside beside that king, bright-eyed, a monster-slayer, unquestionably *good*. Maybe they would remember him saying, *no, this one, this one is we can trust.*

Oh, how poorly that had turned out.

There wasn't a future for them here. There wasn't. There wasn't. There wasn't.

But — ghosts and gods and stars. They wanted it. They wanted it so, *so* badly.

Remus scrabbled for the pouch of sand in their pocket before they could overthink it and dumped the rest of it out on the beach. Acastus looked on, confused, but Remus didn't care. It was gone. The sand was gone, the hope of coming back was gone —

"You're right," he finally managed. "You're right. We should head back."

But as the boy got back into the boat — well. They were fooling no one. They dropped to one knee and refilled the pouch and heaved the rowboat back out into the water.

On the far shore — *his* version of a far shore, because *a foreign place* was the heart of what Rhyseans always *really* meant when they called Illikna *The Far Shore* – there was a bard waiting for him that had helped put him back together. And maybe that could be enough *home*, for now.

"Are you ready?" Remus asked. When Acastus nodded, Remus steeled themselves, picked up the oars, and began to row towards – well. He supposed people could be places. He supposed he could call her *home*.

**[The outro, an instrumental version of Sword and Spinner, begins to play]**

**Abigail:** Sword and Spinner is written and edited by me, Abigail Eliza.

**Chloe:** The music was written, sung, and edited by me, Chloe Peterson.

**Abigail:** The voice of Remus was Abigail Eliza.

**Chloe:** And the voice of Lila was Chloe Peterson.

**Abigail:** If you'd like to hear more about Sword and Spinner or other stories in Rhysea, you can check us out on twitter, instagram, or tumblr @Backagainpodcast or @Abigaillelizawrites on Tik Tok.

**Chloe:** If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. Please remember that this world always tries to make you feel more alone than you truly are.

**Abigail:** There are people out there that will love you without condition or expectation, and you will find them. The light-soaked days are coming. I promise. I hope you have a wonderful day.